

For Immediate Release



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Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka lectures at AUB on history, culture, and revisionism

Nobel laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka, delivered the Anis Makdisi Memorial Lecture at the American University of Beirut (AUB), entitled “Oh-oh, fables sweeter than facts: history, culture and revisionism.”

Introducing the guest, AUB President Dr. Fadlo R. Khuri said, “He has been outspoken in his criticism of apartheid and the politics of racial segregation, not only in South Africa but around the world in issues that relate to us. He is known for his analyses and critiques of oppressive political regimes, and today, Professor Soyinka is really one of the most courageous symbols for championing human dignity.” He continued, “It is therefore particularly fitting that he joins us under the auspices of the transformative Anis Makdisi Program in Literature which promotes and supports interdisciplinary dialogue with openness to different cultural forms and traditions in the study of literature and the humanities.”

Professor Soyinka has taught comparative literature in Nigeria and a number of universities in the US and UK, including Obafemi Awolowo University, Cornell, Emory, Oxford, Harvard, Yale. He has also written numerous theatrical works, as well as novels, short story collections, poetry books, memoirs, essays, movies, and translations. Influences from Western literary traditions are evident in his work, along with the legends and traditions of Nigeria and the Yoruba culture.

He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, and was the first African Nobel laureate to be honored under that category. He was described by the Nobel Foundation as being an eminent litterateur, poet, and playwright “who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence.”

In his lecture at AUB, Soyinka discussed cultures throughout history, highlighting what he called the main problem: the “negative side of revisionism,” describing it as “the denial, which is usually motivated by racial desire, racial consideration, the will to dominate; by first removing the evidence of the people’s productivity, their creativity, and in fact, the totality of their culture, creating a vacuum into which an invading force can conveniently and ‘morally’ enter and fill, simply because they’re acting in the name of culture against barbarism.” He added, “The obsessed agenda of such endeavors has consequences, which transcend centuries. The result of which can erupt at any given time, as in the case of much of the African continent, and of course, it is not limited to the African continent. Cortés did the same thing in the so-called new world, the destruction of the Aztec and Inca culture, to facilitate, or to justify one way or the other, the conquest and occupation of other peoples. Revisionism is probably what prepares the ground for certain phenomenon that we are witnessing today. And I am talking about the destruction that follows the religious fundamentalist movements.”

“Sometimes this revision takes the form of unintended denigration of other cultures. The revision takes the name of development, modern development,” Soyinka explained, giving an example from the lost history of the ancient Nubian civilization upon the building of the Aswan dam. “If the Nubians are considered a distinct culture and civilization, from that which destroyed their heritage, then obviously a case of external cultural aggression is made. The case of disdainful utter denial of the others’ humanity. The case of ‘if you can’t have it, flood it.’

He continued, “All these creative precipitates of human imagination are what define us as humanity. Deny them, and you set the mind on the route to denying the humanity of their creators. Then you create fables, sweet to your hearing, but bitter to the ensuing fortunes of the denied humanity. It leads surreptitiously to conviction that such a category of humans are really sub-humans, and are fit only for one destination, enslavement, or better still, in some cases, genocide. And those are no fables that we can dismiss with a wave of the hand or turn into academic issues. They are facts which humanity finds itself obliged to contend with, even today. The slave markets of Libya are still alive and thriving. If you don’t believe me ask those hundreds of repatriated Nigerians who never believed that such horrors of dehumanization still existed, until recently rescued and airlifted home.”

He ended, “Yes indeed, fables sweeter than facts are far too many. As with artificial sweeteners however, some fables generate side effects, including the cancerous, it results outgrowths that plague the world we happen to inhabit, all at best malignant tumors that have a tendency to burst through the least expected surfaces, lively regions of historic complacency. Defying all known and unknown curators. So now later we are compelled to turn forgotten pages of history, grope our way back to first, or primary causes, and learn to reconcile ourselves to those ordinary unglamorous, even banal facts which offer us the only known and tested cure to our ongoing

dilemma, facts that restore narratives, of the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, to our humanity.”

The lecture was followed by a staged-reading from Soyinka’s celebrated play “Death and the King’s Horseman,” produced by the AUB Theater Initiative, performed by members of the African Club at AUB, among others.

This event was co-organized by the Anis Makdisi Program in Literature at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, in association with the President’s Office at AUB and the Benedict XVI Chair at Notre Dame University (NDU).

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Text by:

Sally Abou Melhem

Writer

Office of Communications

American University of Beirut

For more information please contact:

Simon Kachar

Director of News and Media Relations

Mobile: (+961) 3-427-024

Office: (+961) 1-374-374 ext: 2676

Email: sk158@aub.edu.lb

Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 900 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 9,100 students. AUB currently offers more than 120 programs leading to bachelor’s, master’s, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 420-bed hospital.

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